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Committee on Energy and Commerce, Subcommittee on Health

“Mental Illness and Brain Disease: Dispelling Myths and Promoting Recovery Through Awareness and Treatment.”

June 28, 2006

I have always been aware of depression. My mother has suffered from depression for as long as I can remember. Her sister, my aunt, committed suicide in 1987 while suffering from diagnosed, but untreated, bipolar disorder. I had even had small bouts of depression growing up, but never believed I could suffer from “mental illness.”

I am an attorney in Kansas City, Missouri. I graduated at the top of my class from the University of Missouri – Kansas City School of Law.

Not long after graduating and beginning my dream job with a prestigious Kansas City law firm, I realized something was wrong. I didn't smile or laugh. Feelings of sadness and despair inexplicably began to cascade over me. I had the perfect life (great job, good friends, money), but the world seemed dark and hopeless. The fact that I *should* have been happy made my misery even worse.

As an associate at a big law firm, I was expected to work long hours and weekends in order to meet the billable hour requirement, but I was frequently chastised by the partners in my firm because I was not hitting the bottom line and my attitude seemed poor. I was told I didn't seem like “part of the team.” Instead of billing hours and being part of the team, though, I was living a secret life: a life where I was abusing drugs and alcohol heavily and regularly in order to ease the pain of my depression. Those drug and alcohol binges were always followed by even darker days where I could not even get out of bed.

I was really sick. But all I could think was that my employers would assume I was weak or lazy. That I couldn't cut it in the corporate world and surely wasn't smart enough to work for their prestigious law firm. After all, smart people don't suffer from mental illness.

I have learned, though, that depression is a real disease brought on by a number of factors, including physical and chemical changes in the brain. I have also learned that depression is a very treatable illness. In November 2003, I began to receive counseling and anti-depressant medication, which was covered by the group health insurance plan at the firm. By then, though, it was too late for my job. My lack of billable hours, combined with my constantly runny nose and regular hangovers led the partners to suggest that I look for “other opportunities outside the firm.”

And, once I left the big firm and opened my own law practice, I could no longer get mental health insurance coverage. I am fortunate that I can afford to continue my treatment even without insurance coverage. But what about the many people who cannot afford the \$400 a month I pay?

Today, I am recovering from depression. I have a successful and growing law practice. I just got married 3 weeks ago. When I relapse, which I do, I know that I am not “lazy” or “overly emotional” or simply feeling sorry for myself. I have depression – a real and serious illness that affects millions of Americans.

That is why I am so grateful and honored to be here today in the U.S. House of Representatives. Since I began speaking out about my depression in an effort to reduce the stigma of depression for others, I have had been amazed by the millions of people I have met who are living with and suffering from depression and other mental disorders. In February of this year, I attended and spoke at a press briefing for the Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance’s presentation of the groundbreaking paper: The State of Depression in America. I even shared a podium with Mike Wallace and Representative Patrick Kennedy.

By removing the stigma of depression and helping people recognize that depression is a real illness, we bring this shadowed illness into the light of day and give millions of people who are now quietly suffering from this excruciatingly painful illness the opportunity to seek treatment – treatment that we know can and does help.